

Opinion

**Pokies: game over**

Andrew Bolt

1099 words

28 May 2004

Herald-Sun

HERSUN

1 - FIRST

21

English

Copyright 2004 News Ltd. All Rights Reserved

They are evil, mindless, addictive and without virtue. They are poker machines and Victoria should switch them off.

I LOATHE our pokies. I wish the Kirner Government had never let these foul machines loose on our communities, to pick the pockets of the poor, rob their children and tempt the weak to crime.

What are they good for? At their very best they kill time for people who should be getting on with something more useful, and they titillate the lazy with fool's dreams of fast bucks earned with no honour or sweat.

But at their worst, they destroy families – some I know and like too well to tell you about here.

These machines are worse than foul. They're evil, and I'm not surprised an astonishing 90 per cent of people surveyed by the Bracks Government's own Gambling Research Panel now say they want fewer of them.

Fewer? There should be none. None at all.

We must ban them, as we banned them before, when we had moral gumption. Let's ban them, now we've seen the havoc they wreak.

It will be a battle, of course, to get the Bracks Government to do what is plainly now the right thing.

After all, the Government is addicted to the pokie taxes, which now rake in well over 10 per cent of its total tax income each year.

The last government I know that lived off vice like this was the British administration of Hong Kong, where I once lived.

There, we remembered with disgust how the British governors before World War II refused to ban opium despite the misery and depravity the drug inflicted on the poor.

The British used then many of the arguments our own gambling bosses and their government cronies use today to protect their nice little earners -- most users don't get

into strife, those that do have only themselves to blame, we shouldn't be telling people what they can or can't do.

You know those stale lines.

But the bottom line was that the Hong Kong Government was hooked on opium taxes then -- as the Bracks Government is hooked on the pokies now -- and at times raked in as much as 45 per cent of its budget from the drug trade.

We look back at the British and wonder how they could have been so callous, so blind to the social catastrophe of the evil they were so happy to tax and to live off like some pimp.

And one day, I hope, we'll wonder how our own Government could have been so greedy and heartless, too.

As everyone knows, it's the poor who are paying the price for our Government's addiction to pokies.

The poorest suburbs rack up the biggest losses to these machines. And what losses -- in our second poorest municipality, Maribyrnong, every adult loses an average \$1077 a year on the pokies.

How sick-makingly symbolic it is that hard-scrabble Greater Dandenong, the poorest of our poorest areas, not only records the second-biggest losses to pokies but has as its local member John Pandazopolous, the Minister for Gambling. The Labor Minister for Gambling at that.

I T'S not just the adults who lose, either, as anyone who knows a gambling addict will tell you. For every row of gamblers flushing their pay down the pokie slots, there's bound to be some children back at home who will have less to eat that week, or must go without good books, decent clothes or the dream of going to a great school.

I hear people sternly lecture the chronic gamblers that it's all their own fault, and why should decent, responsible gamblers be deprived of a flutter just because some people are too weak to stop when they're already broke.

Oh, such bracing individualism. Tell it to the gamblers' hungry kids, maybe. Tell it to their harried wives or husbands, trying to hide the family grocery money somewhere safe.

Keep talking. Tell them how you think drugs should be legalised, too, because plenty of stronger people could use them as well without getting addicted.

Tell them there shouldn't be rules on porn, either, because there are plenty of crotch-rubbers who don't go out and actually rape anyone, either, or molest their daughters.

And people do, of course, say all that and more. Has there ever been a time when the notion of giving up some dangerous and dubious pleasures to protect the weak been made to seem so kill-joy? So repressive?

That's why the pokies' wheels keep whirling, the lights keep strobing and the noiseboxes keep making sounds like some bursting piggybank is just about to vomit into your lap.

But back come those rugged individualists, back from telling children why no one is stopping mum from sending all the family's money down the slot.

"Yes," these dead-hearts jeer, "next you'll be saying we should ban Tatts tickets as well. Next you'll be making us lock up every pub because some people are alcoholics."

Hmm, is that an idea for a sozzled nation? But, no, let's not get sidetracked.

Do these blind self-pleasers know why we want to close the pokies, and not the horse racing, for example, or the scratchies? It's because the woman jailed last month for stealing didn't lose that

\$1.6 million on the horses, but on the pokies.

It's because the boss of a trauma centre who was jailed the week before for stealing didn't lose that \$570,000 on Tattslotto, but on the pokies.

It's because the mother of three who was called a pathological gambler by a judge in March didn't drop her stolen \$584,000 on the dogs, a raffle or a game of blackjack, but on the pokies.

It's because eight out of 10 gambling addicts confess that of all the ways to lose money, they lose it most on the pokies. There's just something about them that brings out the worst in us.

A ND there's nothing about them that brings out the best. Is there any form of gambling that shuts people off from each other? Is so mechanical? Is so addictive? Is so utterly mindless and without virtue?

Ban them. Help the weak. Ban them. Think of the children. Ban them. Protect the poor. Ban them. Show some heart. Some virtue.

Just ban them.